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SUBJECT Interview with Claire Sterling

DIANE REHM: Just before Christmas, Pope John Paul II offered his forgiveness to Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish terrorist who shot and nearly killed him back in May of 1981. But investigative reporter Claire Sterling says Agca did not act alone and that Western leaders have deliberately tried to mislead the public about a conspiracy to kill the Pope. She's with me in our first hour.

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REHM: ...assassins. Investigative reporter Claire Sterling says there was an organized plot to murder Pope John Paul II, and traces its source to the Bulgarian secret services, acting on behalf of the Soviet KGB. But she charges that the Western public was deliberately misled by its own leaders to believe there was never a conspiracy at all.

I'm Diane Rehm. Claire Sterling is here in the studio with me. And we'll be taking your calls during the hour on 966-8850.

Claire Sterling, it's nice to have you here again.

CLAIRE STERLING: I'm glad to be back.

REHM: This is a story that definitely continues to unfold. But from the beginning, it was a very confusing one for us here in the Western World.

STERLING: Well, it was very confusing because there was evidence from the very start, from the very minute this young man was arrested that he could not have acted alone. But within 48

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hours of the attack on the Pope, the story was so thoroughly turned around that the world was given to believe that he did act alone, that he was a maniac, a nut case, a lone crazed killer, a Moslem fanatic who hated Christendom, a kook, in short, of the kind we have seen operating on other occasions in the United States and elsewhere. And this story continued to be fostered on the public, both in Italy, in Rome, and throughout the Western World.

In the summer of that year, in July, the young man, Mehmet Ali Agca, was brought to trial. The state prosecutor at that trial claimed that he was a maniac and a loner who had acted alone, he had come out of nowhere and he was a delirious Moslem fanatic, and so on.

But when the court issued its motivation in Italy that following September, saying that he -- contradicting entirely what the state prosecution had said in the trial, the court said, in motivation for a life sentence for Agca, the court said that he was not insane. On the contrary, that he was psychically mature and exceptionally balanced, with exceptional mental equilibrium; that the courts in Turkey, where he had been convicted for a previous terrorist murder in 1979, had also found him, all the doctors in Turkey had also found him to be entirely sane and in full control of his actions, very self-possessed, extremely intelligent, and cool-headed. The court also found that he showed ever sign of being a professional hit man with training and experience, of having worked closely with a conspiratorial organization of some kind, that he was just the tip of an iceberg, with the most sinister and ominous implications for destabilizing and worldwide terrorism, and so on.

The court issued this statement in September. Not a single newspaper, in or out of Italy, published the text of it. A few words of it were published here and there in Italy. It never got outside of Italy.

REHM: You were there at the time.

STERLING: I was there at the time. And since I was able to see the court's motivation. It was clear to me from what the court -- the statement from the presiding judge, Santiacapi (?), said in this 50-odd-page statement, that there was indeed evidence available to the authorities of a far-flung, ominous conspiracy to kill the Pope. And it seemed to me that somebody ought to be looking into who it was that wanted him dead.

REHM: Claire, the reports two days after the Pope was shot in the Italian newspapers certainly stated, boldly, that Agca had not acted alone. And yet, at the same time, two days

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later the New York Times stated, absolutely flatly, that Agca was a lone assassin.

STERLING: Correct. That was -- the New York Times was citing authoritative Italian government sources and police sources. One shouldn't blame this, in that case, on the New York Times. That was a statement given to The Times reporter on the spot who was there for the shooting and who obviously didn't have the background or the connections, perhaps, to go any deeper on the spot in a daily news story. And it wasn't just in the New York Times that that appeared. It appeared all over the Western European press at all. That marked the turnaround within 48 hours. That is, the Pope was shot on May 13th in the afternoon, and by the morning of May 15th, 1981 that was the story sent around the Western World by certain authorities in Rome.

I can't say specifically which authorities made this decision because I'd be sued for libel. I think I have a good idea.

REHM: When did you actually get into it?

STERLING: I started to be interested when the court's motivation for the life sentence was published in September, following the trial in July of '81. And when I got down to read the statement, I was approached by the Reader's Digest and asked if I would just -- if they could just turn me loose with an open-ended assignment, take as long as I like, go to whichever countries I found necessary, spend as much as I needed for traveling and expenses, until I could find enough, if I could, to indicate what the plot, the nature of the plot.

And I then I set off around October, late October. And just as I was setting off, the courts themselves, the Italian courts themselves decided to reopen the investigation, on the strength of the motivation of sentence of Judge Santicapi. It was clear that the court absolutely could not let that situation lie with the case closed, with Agca simply as a lone gunman. And the investigation was reopened and the a judge called Elario Martella was appointed to investigate his possible accomplices.

REHM: And that investigation continues even now.

STERLING: That investigation has just been closed. It was just closed before Christmas. The judge, after two years of investigating the available evidence, following the available clues in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey...

REHM: What a trail.

STERLING: ...delivered his documentation, which runs to

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several thousand pages, to the attorney general's office. The attorney general is now considering this report. He will make his report around the 1st of February recommending or not recommending the trial of those who have been arrested already.

REHM: So, have you had access to any of that report?

STERLING: No. There is no way that anybody could have access to that report. I had access to the original papers, documentation preceding the trial in July 1981, including the text of the original interrogations of Agca.

Now, Agca has been dismissed by a good part of public opinion and the press as a compulsive liar or a pathological liar. Not a word of what he says, presumably, can be believed. And therefore when, a year after his arrest, he began to make a very lengthy confession about the plot implicating the Bulgarian secret services, naming three Bulgarians who were on the spot with him in Rome, according to his confession, and implicating several other Turks who were brought into the mechanics of the plot, implicating two godfathers of the Turkish arms Mafia operating out of Sofia, Bulgaria, he said -- when he began to confess, his confession -- he had already been so discredited in the public mind that it was a relatively easy thing for the Bulgarians' lawyers to say, "You see, he really is such a liar. Who believes him on this?"

Nevertheless, the papers I had access to for the original trial, hardly any of which appeared in the courtroom, but were accessible to the public after the trial ended, indicated that he did say -- that is, some of the things he said seemed to me worth following, and they turned out to be true and they turned out to be invaluable in opening the trial, and in fact led me -- by following the clues provided in those original texts of his interrogation and original police report sent in from a dozen countries to the Italian police in the first weeks after the attack on the Pope, it was possible, by following those clues, for me to reach a conclusion in August of 1982, before anybody knew that Agca was confessing to the Bulgarian secret service role, to reach my own conclusion in which I did conclude that the Bulgarians had been responsible, on the basis of evidence that he had indicated for which I could find independent confirmation in six countries.

REHM: Now, when you look back at that very day that it happened, apparently there's a photograph which shows very clearly a man who is on his way out just as Agca himself is being held on to by this nun who absolutely refused to let go.

Had Agca gotten away or had Agca, himself, been killed at that moment, the whole story would have been different.

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STERLING: The whole story would have ended, I believe. He was meant to be killed. There's no question.

REHM: You and Paul Hensey both come to the same conclusion with regard to that.

STERLING: Yes.

REHM: He was in here just a few weeks ago.

STERLING: Yes. Well, we're not alone in this.

REHM: That he was absolutely meant for death right then and there.

STERLING: Oh, yes. This has been said. This has been said by several defectors from the Bulgarian secret service who know the method of operation down to the bone, who have no doubt whatever. I think there is very little question in anybody's mind who knows the workings of this kind of secret service operation.

REHM: How many would you estimate, then, were there in the square.

STERLING: Well, there could -- according to Agca's -- what has leaked of Agca's confession, because none of us know officially what he has told the judge, there were at least four Turks and three Bulgarians in the square.

Now, we do know two Turks have been arrested and are now being detained in Italian prisons who will be coming up for trial when the trial comes, in the spring, probably. One Bulgarian is now under house arrest temporarily. He has been...

REHM: He was the one who was just released for health reasons.

STERLING: He has not been released. That is another example of the misreporting in the Western press. The judge specifically refused to release -- to offer provisional liberty, which is the phrase in Italian, for the Bulgarian Antonov, on the grounds, as the judge said in this communique, of the gravity of the charges against him. He only conceded a transfer from prison to house arrest...

REHM: Oh, I see.

STERLING: ...for health reasons. But this was reported in the Western press as a release, which is just totally untrue.

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In fact, the day he was transferred to house arrest, the attorney general's office appealed to the tribunal of liberty in Italy for his return to prison on the ground that under house arrest he would -- he might either escape or be killed. And the ruling on that will be next Tuesday.

REHM: Hmmmmmm.

STERLING: So he may be brought back.

RHEM: So there was Agca held on to by this nun, while others who apparently were part of the plot escaped.

STERLING: Yes.

Now, the man who was photographed running away for a long time seemed to be hopelessly unidentifiable. You could only see a quarter of a profile of his face just turning to look behind him, and a sort of a lot of hair and the shape of his body within a heavy cumbersome jacket. He was photo -- but when he was photographed by this ABC cameraman from Detroit, the cameraman saw him holding a gun, but you can't see it in the photograph. But the cameraman and his wife and two friends, who were there as tourists, all saw the gun clear. There was no question in our minds, of the press, that he had been part of the plot. But for a long time he was not identified.

Then, Agca told one of his lies, which unfortunately weakened his credibility, and said that the fellow running away was one of the Bulgarians he had named, Hodor Ivazov (?). Well, when the Bulgarians held a press conference in December of '82, Ivazov was present and he clearly was not the fellow in the picture.

Afterwards, Agca admitted to the judge that he had been protecting a Turk who had been a close friend of his in Greece -- in Turkey and who was involved in the plot, and for whom, indeed, the judge has issued an order of arrest. And that is Ora Chelik (?), and he has been identified as the young man in the photograph.

REHM: So, we continue to have developments in this case. It is a story that obviously is not going to end for quite a while.

Why do you believe there was any attempt whatsoever, if you do continue to believe this, on the part of Western officials to cover the idea of a plot?

STERLING: Yes, I do believe this very firmly, and I think there's a good deal of evidence to confirm my belief in the book, because -- that is, I can't really tell you why. I

don't understand fully, because the enormity of this crime would seem to me to make it -- to rule out normal explanations, the normal dimensions of that kind of expediency explanation. I think there were several factors we could accept. The most immediate is that Andropov, who was the head of the KGB when the order was given to shoot the Pope, then became the head of the Soviet Union. It's a very painful, difficult, politically awkward, in fact, impossible, impossible kind of political situation for, let us say, the President of the United States to sit down at a table with the leader of the Soviet Union if he is considered by world public opinion to have been the man who gave the order to shoot the Pope.

And the President -- the White House has let it be known, and, unofficially, U.S. intelligence analysts have let it be known many times over, that it would be impossible for President Reagan to have a summit meeting with Andropov when and if the proof were offered. That's one very compelling immediate reason to avoid that kind of condemnation.

More generally, though, I think that it is a terribly harsh and painful thing for a Western public to grasp the possibility that the Soviet Union, our big interlocutor, the country with which we must absolutely deal to maintain normal diplomatic relations, cohabit with on the planet, for disarmament negotiations, for every kind of diplomatic negotiation, for trade, finance, everything, that if this country should have as its unofficial policy, should include the instrument of political assassination as part of its method of diplomacy, well, then we just have to rethink how do we deal with this country, how do we negotiate, how do we live with it, how do we negotiate with its leaders. And -- because I believe, of course, we must continue to live with this country and negotiate with its leaders and negotiate disarmament, and so on, as I'm sure any normal civilized human being would believe.

It's obvious that we -- that recognizing the guilt in this case would require a very careful and painful kind of rethinking of how do we do it, what do we do, what kind of -- do we hold them accountable, up till what point, and what form does our protest take, without blowing the world up.

REHM: I wonder whether there aren't a great many people who would believe that the Soviet Union's actions in this case, if in fact they were involved, would be out of character for them.

STERLING: A lot of people do believe that. And, of course, they don't know very much about Soviet history if they do. I mean there are people who believe that the Soviet Union has never gone in for political assassination, which is totally untrue. I mean the most famous and celebrated case, of course,

was that of Leon Trotsky, who was hacked to death with a hatchet. And the man, the agent who was sent in by Stalin personally to kill Trotsky in Mexico City, when he got out of jail, was given the award of the Order of Lenin, or Hero of the Soviet Union, I believe. And his mother was awarded a decoration by Stalin, just for being the mother of the man who hacked Trotsky to death.

A more recent example of Soviet political assassination, much more relevant to what we're talking about, was the killing of President of Hafizullah Amin of Afghanistan, who had been put in at first by the Soviet leaders in their first sort of surrogate military coup in Afghanistan, and then didn't suit them sufficiently, as a sufficiently pliant instrument; and therefore the Politburo decided -- this is all documented by defectors of high rank from the KGB -- the Politburo decided that he had to go, sent in an assassin to put poison in his soup -- I know it sounds like a comic opera, but it's true. And while that assassin was in the kitchen trying to slip poison into Hafizullah Amin's soup, another crew of gunmen sent by the KGB came in and killed the president and everybody else walking around in the presidential palace.

And that was not so long ago. We can -- it's still within the remembrance. It's only two years ago. We can, I think, remember that one.

And it applies. I think it's relevant in the case of the Pope, in that this Pope is unique in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, especially the contemporary history of the church, in that he comes from the Eastern European sector of the world, that he was formed as a priest under a communist regime which had been imposed forcibly by the Soviet Union. He is not anti-socialist, but he is very nationalist and very strongly opposed to foreign domination of his own country's socialist regime.

REHM: And perhaps was seen by the Soviets as having been set in place by the U.S.

STERLING: And I believe that's the most logical explanation, that they believed President Carter's National Security Adviser Brzezinski actually manipulated, engineered the choice of Pope John Paul. Of course that's totally preposterous to imagine that the United States could have had such powers. But it is not preposterous to believe that the Russians would believe it, because of the whole history of their fear of encirclement, a fear that the capitalist world would go to any lengths to break off parts of the area they control and cut into their power structure to bring about the downfall of the socialist system. They are perfectly capable of believing, and I think they did believe from the day he was chosen, that this was

a plot by the United States and Western capitalism to break Poland off from the Soviet empire and begin the disintegration of the Soviet empire.

Now, therefore, I think they watched him very carefully from the day he -- they were stunned, they were obviously stunned when he was picked. They watched him carefully. And as his enormous hypnotic hold over the Catholic populations of Eastern Europe became plain, their alarm must have grown to enormous proportions. It wasn't just Poland, it was all of Eastern Europe: East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Byelorussia, the Ukraine. Wherever there was a Catholic population which had been held in total submission, what they call the church of silence, under previous Popes, this Pope has brought a surge of open religious sentiment and has become an alternative Pole of authority within the Soviet bloc, of moral, spiritual authority, if you like. But it's political also because he is a nationalist, he doesn't believe in foreign control -- in fact, he strongly opposes foreign domination of any socialist system -- and because he strongly defends the liberty of the working class, the liberty of free trade unions, freedom of speech and press and freedom of worship, all of which are simply -- are such a challenge to the whole structure of power in the Soviet Union, that he becomes an intolerable danger to them.

REHM: Investigative journalist Claire Sterling, who has lived and reported from Italy for a number of years. She's written extensively about the topic of terrorism. And her latest book is called "The Time of the Assassins," about the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II. It's just been published by Holt Rinehart and Winston....

Considering the fact that Agca forecast his attempt on the life of the Pope, does that in any way argue against his affiliation with a large -- with the backing of the Bulgarians and the Soviets?

STERLING: Not at all. Not at all. He was in prison in Istanbul in 19 -- in November 1979 on his -- for his self-confessed guilt in the murder of a journalist in Turkey, of an editor, a leading editor in Turkey. His escape from prison was arranged, as we now -- we know now who arranged the escape. In fact, this Ora Chelik, the fellow in the photograph, was one of the two Turks most important in arranging the escape. And Ora Chelik, in turn, worked for Bekir Chelink (?), who was a godfather of the Turkish Mafia operating out of Sofia, which, in turn, the whole Turkish Mafia is directly under the control of the Bulgarian secret service. And the documentation for that is in my book and easily findable.

Well, we know that that escape -- we know now that that

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escape was arranged by a godfather of the Turkish Mafia who has -- was recruited into the Bulgarian secret service in 1974. Therefore, although he's a gangster and a criminal who runs an enormous smuggling operation, he also serves the political purposes of the Bulgarians in doing so. He's in prison now, but he has been up until now.

And knowing that, any letter written by Agca the day after he escaped from prison would naturally be suspect, I think. Now, what he did was when he escaped from prison, he sent a letter to the newspaper Milliyet, whose editor he had allegedly murdered. The Pope was coming to visit Istanbul in, I think, three days after that. And he said, "If this Christian crusader comes to this Moslem part of the world, I will certainly kill him. He is trying to" -- well, the implication was that he was trying to bring Western Cristendom in to destroy the values of the Islamic world, and so on.

Well, first of all, Agca is not very religious. I've seen his family.

REHM: It's interesting.

STERLING: He hardly ever goes to the mosque. He drinks alcohol. He has never shown the smallest signs of Moslem fanaticism. So that a letter of that kind is automatically suspect.

He said afterward, to the Italian judge, that he sent it in order to divert police attentions from himself to the security of the Pope, to get more police deployed to protect the Pope, would leave him freer to get out of the city. Which may or may not be the case.

It's more likely that, considering that this Pope had already been to Poland for his first visit to Poland, had already shown the hold he had when two million Poles came and worshipped reverentially at his knees on his first visit to Poland, already it was clear to the Soviet Union that he was going to be a terrible problem. And therefore the probability is that he was advised to write a letter of that sort simply for future reference, so that he was on record, first of all, as a right-wing terrorist, convicted killer...

REHM: And yet he had dabbled with both sides of the political spectrum.

STERLING: Yes. Well, he had grown up moving in very right-wing circles, Gray Wolf circles. There is no police record in Turkey of his ever having been actually a member of the Gray Wolves, but he certainly moved in those circles from his school

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days onward, and in the university as well. The image of him as a right-wing terrorist was enhanced when he made what turned out to be a fake confession. He may have been involved in that murder in Istanbul, but the whole case has been reopened in Turkey, and other people are being -- are considered the true killers. But all this was contributing to his image as a right-wing, unregenerate right-wing killer.

But as he told the judges in Italy, starting in 1977, when he went -- he claimed that he went to a Palestinian, left-wing Palestinian camp for training, which could have happened because Turks of the right and left -- terrorists of the right and left were both going to these camps for years, hundreds of them. He claimed that after his return from that camp in 1977, he had contacts, secret contacts with underground terrorist groups of both the right and the left.

Now, we don't know. We have no proof of that. We have only his word for it, part of which could be corroborated objectively by the parallel quality of other experiences to that one. But I can't say for sure that it was true. It does show something of his mentality.

I think what's important about his politics is not whether he was an activist in the Gray Wolves or had secret contacts with left-wingers. He's a professional hit man. He was on a payroll from the time he came back from that Palestinian camp in 1977. He told the judge, and I found the evidence of this as one of the things he said that was absolutely true, that on returning -- within a couple of months of returning from the training camp, somebody began to finance him. And indeed, we have found four bank accounts opened in his name.

REHM: He lived very well.

STERLING: He lived very well. And he collected -- when he was still an obscure student at Ankara, before anybody had ever heard of him, he had no police record, he did nothing on the campus involving terrorist activities, in the course of one year, from December '77 to January of -- December '78 to January '79, he was paid \$18,000. Now, what for?

In my opinion, he was a sleeper who had been spotted as a promising hit man in that Palestinian camp, not by the Palestinians, necessarily, but by an agent who could see his possible uses and who kept him on ice until he could be used for something, a special hit.

RHEM: Claire Sterling, what about your own investigations into this whole story? Were you encouraged? Were you discouraged? Were there roadblocks along the way?

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STERLING: Well, there were roadblocks everywhere, everywhere. In Italy I had more luck because there were at least some people, some of the lawyers involved, some of the judges close to the case were determined that this case would get a fair hearing and that it would not -- politics would not be allowed to block it. But politically, it was terribly embarrassing to the Italians. And the United States made its displeasure known very quickly to the Italians. It was clear that official Washington, the Washington establishment did not want this case investigated and publicized. There were pressures on me from certain American sources not to go ahead and write the book.

REHM: To get out.

STERLING: To clear out and cool it.

The difficulties in my way -- also, in West Germany I ran into enormous roadblocks. The authorities in -- the judge investigating this case was kept waiting eight months for clearance to visit the United States. He asked for permission to visit and question witnesses in February of '82 and he didn't get here until October of '82. And I could get no explanation for that delay. The judge himself and other judges close to him have told me -- the first judge, Santiacapi, who handled the first trial, told me there was no cooperation, no serious cooperation either from the intelligence services of the United States or any other of Italy's Western allies. And a good deal of information was simply withheld from the Italian authorities.

My worst difficulty was the atmosphere of disbelief that had been spread throughout the Western World, the public image that had been created of a lone mad killer and the disbelief in the plot that had been spread with the help, alas, of intelligence analysts in Washington and in Bonn and in London, but especially in Washington, who, on a series of occasions, at least six major interviews with important -- with the most important of American newspapers, consistently denied that there could be a Bulgarian connection, repeated that Agca was a loner and a madman, despite the findings of the Italian court, said maybe the Bulgarians knew what he was doing and didn't stop him, but they certainly didn't hire him to do it, made up a whole series of...

REHM: And that resistance to the idea continues even today.

STERLING: Continues to this day. Certainly.

REHM: Let's go to the phones....

We're talking about the assassination attempt on the

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life of Pope John Paul II with investigative journalist Claire Sterling, who has been living and writing in Italy for a number of years. Her latest book on this subject is called "The Time of the Assassins," just published by Holt Rinehart and Winston.

Good morning. You're on the air.

MAN: I just have one criticism, then I had one question. I felt when you said Agca was not religious because he didn't go to mosque and drank alcohol does not mean a person does not believe in his faith. I mean most Catholics ate meat on Friday. Most Jews eat ham. Because you involve yourself in certain laws -- you know, against certain laws does not mean you...

REHM: Yeah. But I think the point that Claire is making is that he was using religious grounds in his statement about his intention to shoot the Pope. I think that that's a different point.

STERLING: Yes, that he wasn't such a fanatic. I mean, clearly, there is no record whatever -- and the court has said so in Italy -- there is no proof at all that he was a fanatic.

MAN: Okay. The question I want to ask. A number of years ago I was in Cairo with a Turkish reporter, and I wanted a visa to Bulgaria. So we went to the Bulgarian Embassy and we met with one of the officials there -- I won't -- anyway, he spoke to me. He spoke to both of us and he tried to explain to us that someday there would be an Oriental-Christian war. Now, I didn't know what he meant by Oriental. I thought something like Nostradamus, the Chinese would come over from Red China. Later I found out Oriental was a term used by Europeans defining the world of Islam.

And my question is very simple. What do you think about that secretary who said that -- or do you think there was any promotion that someday -- because Lebanon is an example. I seriously doubt there will be many Christians left, say, 20 years from now there. As far as -- will there be -- is there or is there anyone trying to promote, in your opinion, a Islamic-Christian war? And I'm going to hang up. That's a very simple question.

STERLING: Oh. Well, yes. I think, in general, there certainly are very important forces trying to promot an Islamic-Christian war, warfare in whatever form, in terrorist form right now. Certainly the fundamentalist Moslem movement, whose symbolic leader, and whole powerful symbolic leader, is the Ayatollah Khomeini, are attempting to spread a greater Islam, fundamentalist Islam with head-on confrontation -- through a

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head-on confrontation with the Christian West, which is considered the enemy. And we are now suffering, tragically, for -- as these moves of warfare are made. For example, the attacks on our Marines in Beirut, the attack in Kuwait, the attack on the French in Lebanon. These are being carried out by a Shiah Moslem fundamentalist sect which certainly is directed from Teheran by this Moslem fundamentalist movement. And the United States is the main target, but the whole Christian West is included.

REHM: ...Hi. You're on the air.

WOMAN: ...I have a question, and perhaps it gets back to the initial caller, and also the confusion. There's the simplistic approach that people want to make this a religious issue. And I appreciate Claire's comments that, in fact, that was used as a veil to cover many of the other motivations behind this type of action.

Specifically, my comment to Claire Sterling this morning and my question, actually, is why -- I've heard her and Paul Hensley both speak in that path, on it -- why was a Turk chosen by the Bulgarians or by the KGB to be the assassin in this situation, especially in light of the state of Turkey during that time of civil unrest?

And third comment. I also saw Claire Sterling on Nightline one day when they were discussing the same issue, and there was a point made that there had been an Italian magazine that had stated, by a representative or a leader of the Armenian community, and he had actually quoted saying, In our efforts to destroy Turkey, or destroy their public image, we can even --quote, we can even get a Turk to kill the Pope.

And this had been published in an Italian magazine. Perhaps Claire recalls this. And if she had any comment on this relationship.

STERLING: Yes, I do recall the article in the Italian magazine, and the statement was made by a leader of the Armenian Secret Liberation Army, a leader. But there is no other indication whatever that the Armenians had anything to do with this. It was the sort of thing he said for public consumption.

As to the choice of a Turk, however, that's a very important question and I'm glad you raised it. For one thing, Bulgaria has had a special role as a surrogate of the Soviet Union in destabilizing Turkey from the middle '60s onward, and with tremendous results. I mean by the time the army -- by the time the army was compelled to take over, a fact we are reluctant to admit occasionally, but it was compelled by a country on the verge of total collapse to take over power in 1980. The

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terrorist kill rate, right, left terrorist kill rate, was one an hour in Turkey. And Bulgaria provided the overwhelming part of the one million weapons which were found after the army took over, the bulk of which had been smuggled into Turkey by the Turkish arms Mafia, which was created in Sofia and sponsored by, controlled by the Bulgarian secret services precisely to provide the weapons for both the right and the left; primarily for the right, because the left was getting weapons from Palestinian sources as well.

This indicated a longstanding Bulgarian interest in Turkey, in the destabilization of Turkey and in the separation of Turkey from the rest of its NATO allies, because Turkey is the only Moslem country in an otherwise all-Christian strategic, military, political alliance in the West.

REHM: So choosing a Turk was a dual purpose.

STERLING: Perfect. Yes. I believe that this was -- it was a perfect choice. A Turk who would look to the West -- who'd have a strange image as an exotic, foreign, alien character from a turbulent land. And indeed, several columnists wrote just that after the event. From a disturbed land that we couldn't understand, that couldn't understand us, and that we couldn't trust. And the whole idea was to drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies. Not that this alone would have done it, but it certainly would contribute, and has contributed, indeed, to a Western conception of Turkey which should have gone out of date 30 years ago.

REHM: Interesting.

You're on the air.

MAN: Earlier your guest spoke about some moral dilemma of dealing with the Soviet Union if, indeed, Andropov, who was head of the KGB, had some involvement in the attempted assassination of the Pope. But, in fact, isn't the concept of political assassination more or less accepted among even Western World powers and...

STERLING: Yes, certainly.

MAN: I would refer to alleged U.S. involvements in the killings of Allende or Lumumba, as well as repeated press accounts in the United States on attempts by the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro.

STERLING: Castro. Yes, I write about this in the book, in fact.

REHM: But what one does on the surface or acknowledges

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on the surface is probably very, very different otherwise.

STERLING: Yes. And I think -- that is, even if Andropov did not give the order to assassinate the Pope, he was head of the KGB for 16 years. How many other people were killed on orders of the KGB in that period while he was running the organization? I mean it's a false ground, moral ground, pretext, I think, to say that we couldn't deal with Andropov simply because he gave that order. Of course we have to deal with him, whatever order he gave.

The important thing is accountability. The important thing is for, I believe, for the Western public to understand that this is part of Soviet policy, because the tendency of the Western public is to believe that only the CIA does such things. Whereas, indeed, the KGB is a blacker sinner, whatever the CIA has done. The KGB, in recent years, especially, has been at least as black, and in my opinion considerably blacker.

And unless the public understands and is given to understand, unless the knowledge is shared with the public that is available to the governments in the West about this kind of Soviet policy, it simply encourages the Soviet Union to escalate, to go on to bolder actions of this kind, in the knowledge or in the conviction that it will never really have to pay for it in public blame.

REHM: Even, Claire, if the report that is awaiting review right now comes out and clearly states that there was a plot, there was a conspiracy, these are the signs, they do point towards the Bulgarians, what would you expect to be the resolution of that here in this country, here in the Western World? What action, what new stance might the Western World take in regard to that occurrence on the basis of that report?

STERLING: Well, I believe that if we're all going to be fair, which is, of course, an impossible hope, we will accept the findings of the Italian court, which I am convinced will be -- that is, the reports of the attorney general and the investigating judge -- we will accept their findings to the effect that three Bulgarian agents took part directly with Agca and several Turks in the assassination plot.

If that is accepted by the public, then I think -- I don't have all the answers to what we do about it, but I do think we then say, first of all, we have let the Soviet Union know that we know, which in itself is a step forward in dissuasion. It's a force of dissuasion in itself.

Secondly, we must say this is something that we have to talk about at the bargaining table. When we are discussing

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policy, at every level, we must understand that this is part of Soviet policy and we must discuss it with the Soviet Union. Just as I have argued in the past that we must discuss at the bargaining table the fact that the Soviet Union has provided weapons, sanctuary, and training for international terrorists through surrogates. So that not only should we discuss it with the Soviet Union, but with Bulgaria, with South Yemen, in the case of the terrorist training camps, with other states of Eastern Europe who have provided terrorist training and sanctuary, and so on.

In a general way, I think we must start from the premise that it is now on the table, that we are not going to shield them from public view anymore; that when and if they proceed to another act of this kind, we will hold them accountable; and it will be part of our bargaining package.

REHM: Good morning. You're on the air.

WOMAN: First of all, I have four points to make to refute Claire Sterling's speculation.

First of all, even if there were three Bulgarians involved, there are many Poles who are not, you know, in favor of their government. So that that would not prove a direct link. They could be -- in my opinion, they are double agents.

Oriana Falacci has said that the targets of the Red Brigades and the Red Guards -- and it has come out those terrorist groups were trained in Libya by ex-CIA people -- the targets are always moderates.

Now, the Soviet Union was very much in favor of the Pope's role during the tremendous trouble with the Solidarity, which was pretty much created by AFLA and Western powers. And they were very much in favor of the Pope because he was playing a very strong moderating role. And once again, as Falacci says, the targets of these terrorists who were trained in Libya have always been moderates. And the upshot of their deeds, the Dozier kidnapping and various things of that sort, has been to fan a great wave of hatred against -- since they call themselves Reds -- against the moderate Communist Party in Italy and against the Soviet Union, indirectly. And this is the purpose.

And we've had -- you've had two programs recently fanning the speculation against the Soviet Union on this grounds. And we can see the tremendous thing that the Western propagandists are trying to make out of it.

Now, I'd just like to say about Amin, I think it's very interesting that your guest did not mention the London Times had

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quite a large article on it, that Amin had been denounced by his bodyguard as having murdered the former premier, he had tortured many members of his own party, who had called in the Soviet Union to rescue them, and from the terrible things that he was doing to the peasants. The fact that she leaves this out, I think, makes her very suspect and exposes her.

And the last thing I'd like to say is that quite some time ago, before it was so important to go very strongly anti-Soviet in this election year, there was an author of "The Eyes of the KGB," a very top CIA author, and he said the Soviet Union definitely does not go in for this kind of thing. And he refuted your book, Miss Sterling, in very strong terms. I'd like to know if you have bothered to read it and what your opinion is.

Thank you.

STERLING: I don't know who this is and what the book is, I'm sorry to say.

REHM: "The Eyes of the KGB."

STERLING: I'm sorry, I haven't seen the book. I live in Europe and I don't see everything that comes out in American publications. He couldn't have refuted my book, which has just come out this week. Perhaps his ideas were not like mine. I don't doubt that they are quite different.

Let me first say that what I am saying now about the three Bulgarians accused of com -- of direct complicity in the plot is not my opinion. It is an official act of the Italian investigating magistrate, Judge Martella, who has issued warrants of arrest for two Bulgarian diplomats who fled to Sofia before they could be named officially, before the warrants were issued, and a third Bulgarian who had been deputy director of the Bulgarian state airline in Rome, who was imprisoned; that four times the Bulgarian Embassy's lawyers appealed for the liberation of the Bulgarian in prison, Antonov, on the grounds of insufficient evidence against him, and four times the court, various courts in Italy ruled in favor of his continuing detention because of the gravity of the charges against him and the quantity of evidence bearing out those charges.

Therefore, I am not saying -- the judge did it.

Now, to go further, the CIA has, directly or through unidentified spokesmen, in various articles in the New York Times and the Los Angeles times, made a very strong argument in defense of the Bulgarians and the Russians, denying that there could be the Bulgarian connection. Nevertheless, the same analysts have admitted that Antonov is a spook, that he is known to be an

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intelligence agent of the Bulgarians. It is really not possible that the deputy director of the Balkan Airlines, who has got to be an intelligence officer because he handles passports and foreign passengers, and no Eastern European airline can have a deputy director who does not -- who is not directly responsible to its secret service -- it's really not possible that he could have been acting on his own. I don't think anybody who knows the structure of these services could believe that for a moment.

REHM: Good morning. You're on the air.

WOMAN: I'd like to get back to the other central figure in this whole weird plot, the Pope. And he's obviously not a naive man. He's a supreme political person. And I wonder why he went out of his way to make a show of forgiving Agca and what on earth they could have talked about for half an hour following that forgiveness.

STERLING: Yes. Well, that's a very good question, I think. As you say, correctly, the Pope is indeed a very political Pope. Surely, he is also a very spiritual Pope. And his first feelings, I'm sure, in wanting to visit with the man who tried to kill him, were a desire to show the world, give the world an example of Christian forgiveness in a terribly troubled time of killing and violence everywhere in the world.

However, I'm sure, as a political Pope, he could not have been unaware of the political impact of this visit with Agca. And as indeed he said after his 20-minute very moving encounter with Agca, he said that he had complete confidence in the penitent Agca, which was taken to mean by Italians, at least, who are closer to the situation than the rest of us, that he was expressing confidence in Agca as a sincere penitent, therefore as a penitent who was essentially telling the truth in his confession, a confession which involves the Bulgarian secret service.

Now, this, of course, is just an interpretation, but I think it's very hard to get away from that kind of reading of the situation.

WOMAN: Okay.

REHM: Good morning. You're on the air.

MAN: One of your callers, two callers back, I believe, I can't help but get the feeling that her constant remark seems to always tell the listener is give communism a chance. For God sakes, give communism a chance. Communism hasn't done enough horrible things yet.

REHM: One can argue that on a talk show such as this,

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everybody ought to have an opportunity to present his or her point of view.

MAN: I agree.

REHM: And that's exactly what she did.

Now, what's your point, sir.

MAN: Well, that was one of the [unintelligible] that I drew from her comments. Now, I don't know why you should interrupt my making a comment...

REHM: 'Cause I'd like you to get to your point.

MAN: All right. Well, I would like to ask your guest, do you think it would be wise for President Reagan to just give up in Lebanon and let Syria take over, with all the political consequences and other troubles that would follow...

REHM: You know, sir, I'm afraid that that is entirely -- no, I'm sorry. It is entirely off the subject. We are talking about the assassination attempt on the life of Pope John Paul. And while certainly there are a great many other issues of interest in the world, they are not what we are concerned with this morning...

Good morning. You're on the air.

MAN: My question this morning for Miss Sterling is about the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul, the collaboration between the Bulgarians and the Turks. It seems kind of ironic because through history there supposedly have been natural hatreds between the Turks and the Bulgarians, just as much as between the Turks and the Greeks. And I wondered, in this situation, did this have any type of effect on the collaboration? And if it does have any type of -- these nationalistic tendencies and interests, do they ever interplay between some of the planning that goes on between the Eastern European intelligence services, which are predominantly directed by the KGB? They have quite a bit of influence in these organizations.

STERLING: Well, of course, there is a very strong historical factor of hatred between Bulgaria and Turkey because of Ottoman rule over Bulgaria, which was cruel and harsh, and which the Bulgarians have never forgotten. And this -- there is also a traditional feeling of kinship with the Soviet Union, which delivered Bulgaria from Byzantine rule. And therefore the Bulgarians are far more friendly towards the Russians than other Eastern European peoples are likely to be, in general, in any case. However, I think -- which means also that there's a very

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close degree of collaboration at government level between Zhivkov, the President of Bulgaria, and Soviet leaders.

I think, however, apart from that, that what's more important is that Bulgaria has acted as a surrogate for the Soviet Union in certain secret service affairs, just as every other Eastern European secret service gets surrogate assignments. Bulgaria has specialized first in the destabilization of Turkey, and also in operating a long-term, far-reaching spy ring in Italy. And Italy has been one of its special areas of operation. So that for this case, it was in an ideal position. Whereas East Germany serves to help in terrorist training, Czechoslovakia would have another role, and so on.

REHM: Good morning. You're on the air.

WOMAN: I'm a freelance researcher in this area, but I do very benign research -- you know, peaceful hours at the Library of Congress and interviewing very nice people. And I was just contemplating on your work in Italy, especially in this case, when you're interviewing all the people necessary, it seems, you know, in a very Byzantine sort of atmosphere of intrigue and so forth.

How do you piece out who's telling you the truth and who isn't?

STERLING: Well, you know, that's why -- I'm glad you asked that, so I had explained something about why I wrote this book the way I did.

My hope was to take the reader by the hand and show him how an investigative reporter starts from zero in a case of considerable political and human interest and starts on an investigative track and follows leads, discards some, accepts others, finds sources, evaluates the sources, discards some, accepts others, reaches a final judgment, which is what I tried to do in this book, starting from zero.

And it's not that I'm trying to pride myself on being any better a reporter than any other investigative reporter. I simply had the opportunity. I had nine months to -- I took nine months to do it. I went to Turkey five times, I went to Germany five times, I went to Switzerland, Austria, Tunisia. I was in and out of Italy. And I try to show the reader step-by-step how I went about doing it and what I kept finding, the major finds that it made it possible for me to get the breakthrough I think I got.

WOMAN: My word. Well, of course, you speak Italian, probably. But do you speak other languages?

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STERLING: I speak Italian and French, and that got me through.

REHM: All right. Thanks for calling.

Hi. You're on the air.

MAN: I'd be interested in exploring in a little bit more detail the motivation of the American intelligence community covering this up. And I'm not really sure that that's clear to me now. I'll hang up and I'll listen to the answer.

STERLING: I don't know the whole answer. I offer several at the end of my book, several explanations that have been offered to me, none of which I endorse or fail to endorse. I just offer them as speculation.

One thing I do think is true, apart from all the other considerations, and that is bureaucratic langor, I suppose you might call it. There was no order, there was never an order given to the CIA to make this a priority investigation. No CIA station, to my knowledge, was told to follow the case from beginning to end and to investigate it independently. And indeed, CIA analysts have said this to the press several times over, that this was not considered a priority, that no orders were given for...

REHM: All right. But let's reverse the situation. Suppose that you had the investigation of an assassination attempt on a U.S. President. Would the Italian police necessarily have gotten into it, the secret police?

STERLING: No. Certainly not. But in this case, the key to this case was that it could not be investigated in any one country. This was an attempted murder in the Vatican, on Italian soil but on church soil, by a Turk who had passed through -- who passed a summer in Bulgaria, who had passed through at least seven frontiers, who had been involved with certain definable people and forces in several of those countries. It could only be investigated by going -- by looking closely under the surface in Turkey, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Austria, West Germany and Italy.

In this case, for Italy to have been left alone to conduct this investigation was wildly unfair, and I think also displayed a lack of conscience about a monstrous crime that I find shocking.

REHM: Are you suggesting that the U.S. intelligence forces exerted their influence on other Western...

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STERLING: No. I say that all the Western services instinctively...

REHM: Backed off.

STERLING: ...backed off because they intuitively reached the conclusion early on that this had to involve the East in some way, and they just didn't want any part of that story to come out. They didn't want to look at it, they didn't want to investigate it. And if they had indications -- and several come up in the book -- if they did have indications of where it led on their own, in their own countries, they simply sat on them.

REHM: Weren't you told at one point that you were actually on the Bulgarian hit list?

STERLING: Yes, I was told that by an American. And it turned out -- who said that the information had come from the Italian intelligence service. But according to the Italian intelligence service, it had come from the Americans. And my feeling there was that it was the Americans who were trying to warn me off and tell me to cool it and get off this story.

REHM: And you refused to back off.

STERLING: Yes.

REHM: And they knew you'd refuse to back off.

STERLING: Well, they should have known. The man who came to see me has known me a long time. He should have known that I was unlikely to drop this story. I'd already written it in the Reader's Digest. I hadn't the smallest intention of...

REHM: What are you going to do with it now? Obviously, continue to write in newspapers as the story unfolds.

STERLING: Yes, I will, because I think in the next few months we will have fascinating developments in this case. The attorney general's report will be out, the judge's report will be published in a couple of months. The case will be sent to trial. There will be a trial, with or without Antonov. If he escapes or doesn't escape, or if he's murdered, under house arrest or not, there will be a trial involving Bulgarians and Turks. And I believe that those who have argued that there is no Bulgarian connection will just end up with egg on their faces.

REHM: Claire Sterling. And the book we've been talking about is called "The Time of the Assassins" and has just been published by Holt Rinehart Winston.